

IS DOG TOXIC LAKE'S FIRST VICTIM? - OFFICIALS CONCERNED OVER SPREADING MICROBES

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LAKE SAMMAMISH

Sharon McGill thought nothing of the bright-green dots lapping against the shore as she and her golden retriever, Maggie, waded into Lake Sammamish. Over the years, she said, the green slick has been a common sight during the balmy days of summer and early fall

But on Tuesday, her dog began heaving and coughing. Four hours later, Maggie was dead, raising concern about a strain of cyanobacteria, some of it toxic, that has swarmed much of the lake's beaches and coves.

King County health officials don't know what killed the dog but say the toxins may have been responsible.

The microbe, more commonly known as blue-green algae, also may have caused several cases of rashes and stomach ailments among children who may have swallowed the infested lake water, according to health officials.

"Had I known that I was swimming in toxic algae, if that was the case, I wouldn't have been in there," said McGill.

Yesterday, scientists continued testing samples collected from the lake over the past two days to determine whether the toxic bacteria is widespread. By late afternoon, as much as two-thirds of the lake had been covered with blooms of the blue-green algae, which scientists say are usually harmless but for unknown reasons sometimes produce toxins.

The Seattle-King County Public Health Department advised people, particularly children, to avoid swimming in the lake. However, the situation does not warrant closure of the parks or beaches, officials said. Taking no chances, some schools have canceled outings to the lake.

"The health department's position is that human-health risks appear to be relatively low," said Daniel Moran, a senior environmental-health specialist with the department.

However, if a high concentration of the bacteria is ingested, there is risk of stomach and intestinal ailments, possibly vomiting.

Small animals and children are especially at risk, health officials say.

Toxins produced by this strain of blue-green algae - not a true algae but rather a microscopic organism capable of photosynthesis - attack the liver. They can cause dizziness, nausea and vomiting.

Still, health officials concede they know little about the toxic bacteria.

"I personally will have to try and find out more about what's known about the health effects from blue-green algae," said Dr.

Russell Alexander, a health-department disease specialist. It isn't listed in many medical texts, he notes.

No one is certain whether the toxic bacteria are the cause of the reported ailments. County health officials, with the help of veterinarians, also are investigating whether the bacteria can be blamed for the dog's death.

"Whatever happened to Maggie was strange, and it's important to educate others that there is a problem," said McGill, who now keeps her other dog, Sammy, on a leash to prevent her from drinking out of the lake.

And no one knows for sure what's to blame for the proliferation of the toxic blooms, although scientists say environmental factors are involved.

"We have had both good and bad periods over the past five years," said Joanna Richey, the lead project manager for the county's Lake Sammamish water-quality project.

The lake is not only a collector for storm-water runoff but for much of the sediment and compounds washed down with it.

Phosphorous and nitrogen - from fertilizers, pesticides, septic tanks and other sources - have been appearing in higher concentrations at Lake Sammamish, providing the nutrients that algae and cyanobacteria need to multiply.

"What really concerns us is that the concentrations seem to be related to land use," said Jonathan Frodge, a King County water-quality planner who spent recent days collecting samples from the lake. Yesterday, he spent his hours on the telephone, talking to people concerned about the blue-green algae.

In some places, the algae was a bright-green soup.

"We've had a lot of algae blooms, but nothing as bad as this," said Bill Barger, who has lived along the lake for 36 years and is a neighbor of McGill.

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- **Caption: PHOTOWANDA J. BENVENUTTI / SEATTLE TIMES: MOLLY MCGILL WALKS SAMMY ON THE PIER AT HER LAKE SAMMAMISH HOME. HER FAMILY'S OTHER DOG, MAGGIE, DIED AFTER INGESTING LAKE WATER.**
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